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INTERIOR DESIGN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES.

AN APPLIED RESEARCH ON THE PLACES CARING AND HOSTING ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN THE CITY OF MILAN.

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ABSTRACT

The capacity to help and support the most vulnerable sectors of population is a critical point for the contemporary urban societies, in a context marked by a sharp contrast between the lack of resources and the need to maintain an adequate level of welfare. One of the most problematic areas is about caring and protecting the asylum seekers and the refugees, who experiment a condition of existential displacement or dislocation (Papadopoulos, 2002) compounded by economic and psychological problems.

The Italian policy about the asylum seekers has often failed to establish a global model, able to empower their conditions as requested by the international agreements. It was in fact largely characterized by an emergency policy, without any systemic perspective, and locations as abandoned schools and mobile homes were chosen randomly to answer the urgent requests of new solutions for a temporary accommodation of the asylum seekers. The result was a vicious circle of fragility, in which the most vulnerable people were hosted in the most unsupportive residential environments.

A research project was developed by a multi-disciplinary group, in Milan, involving public actors, designers and environmental psychologist, with the aim of creating some practical guidelines to evolve these spaces. In particular, the challenge was to favour a process of empowerment, projecting some lo-fi design solutions able to transform an environment perceived as totally precarious in a place of virtuous temporariness, also supporting new forms of individual place attachment and identification (Low & Altman, 1992).

Keywords: design for social challenges; environmental psychology; refugees and asylum seekers

1 THE CHALLENGE OF HOSPITABLE PLACES

In their book Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri see the new barbarians in those global nomads who move in large streams due to wars, dictatorial regimes, and dreams pursued by the rich countries of the world. These barbarian-migrants constitute a powerful multitude, capable of transforming territories politically, without taking root in them, resisting territorialisation. The multitude establishes a new relationship with the built environment, interpreting it as a place for the satisfaction of transitory needs, a place in which to sleep, relax, take a break. “The multitude”, writes Jennifer Allen (2002), “-refugees or even ravers - does not inhabit architecture, but pushes it to the limits of

existence, treating the constructed space as a temporary second skin barely distinguishable from the basic functions of the body." The multitude poses a challenge to the design of inhabited places, which is that of fuelling the ability to make hospitable places.

Only recently the acquisition and consolidation of basic rights ratified on an international scale have prompted European countries[1] to equip themselves not only with emergency care centres close to borders but also reception structures specifically reserved for asylum seekers and political refugees, where in their few months' stay they may begin the process of social reintegration. These structure present a series of important challenges to the competence of the project: wondering about instruments, methods and forms through which designers could concept new kinds of spaces for the refugee accommodation in a foreign country, implies first of all the capability of considering that this special "inhabiting" has lots of implications, such as social, psychological, cultural and political too. It means for the designer to compare his own skills with disciplines able to read and decode the variety of needs that this dwelling involve, in order to design effective and appropriate places: a home that is not a home, but which aspires to be so for a short time, responding to a wide variety of cultural needs[2].

2 THE ROLE OF DESIGN. INNOVATING STRATEGIES THROUGH DESIGNING SPACES, OBJECTS, SOCIAL BODIES. A DESIGN RESEARCH CASE STUDY.

Affecting this system are elements of a global scale (historical, social and economic) capable of provoking a mass movement of populations across the continents. In order to cope with this situation international policies have been developed on various levels, which, however, remain partially inconclusive. The repercussions of these macroscopic phenomena on a local scale create social situations that activate solutions through local regulations and initiatives of public-private collaboration in the social sector. The need to envisage and provide services and devise places of reception for political refugees in the major cities determines the necessity to adopt innovative relationship models, in which the subjects (public and private) providing the service, those who use the service (asylum seekers and refugees) and those who live and operate in the context in which the refugees are integrated (local citizens) can meet and exchange.

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[1] The Council of Europe, since the drafting of its treaty Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950), is the organism created to promote the defence of human rights within the member States. Together with the Strasburg-based European Court of Human Rights it promotes and guarantees respect of the commitments established by the Convention. Over the years the theme of the rights of political refugees has become central and collaboration with the UNHCR has resulted in the drafting of supranational documents and measures to guarantee the safeguarding of the right to asylum. While the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 established once and for all the importance of the protection of refugees' rights in the European Union, each member State maintains a high level of independence in managing its own reception system, since each has different standards. Cf. Calloni, M. Marras, S. and G. Serughetti. 2012. Chiedo asilo. Egea: Milan

[2] R. Papadopulos. 2002. Therapeutic care for refugees. No place like home. Karnac Books

In this contest, design is called upon to bring innovation (which, ultimately, is its purpose) to a complex social system and we could identify that it can play a strategic role on three different levels.

2.1 DESIGN AS NARRATIVE TOOLS

DeCA (Design Cultures Housing[3]) research, coordinated by a group of Interior Design researchers of the Politecnico of Milan[4], which focuses on new concepts of space, objects and visual artifacts for temporary collective reception structures for political refugees in the city of Milan, sets as the central issue of the project the relationship between, on one hand, the person who expresses multiple needs and demands and, on the other, the built environment which offers a complex, well-structured but at times fragile solution. This fragility, which is partly due to the difficulty in finding fair compromises between different laws, and to the need for integrated services of social inclusion in the face of chronically scarce resources, would seem to reflect the rift suffered by individuals whose journey – that of life and that of migration - has brought them to such places. The space designed as a temporary home, however, may be included in a delicate process of bridging the gap, by adopting clear approaches, neither universal nor deterministic, which take into account interferences in the ways in which the space is conceived, perceived and used.

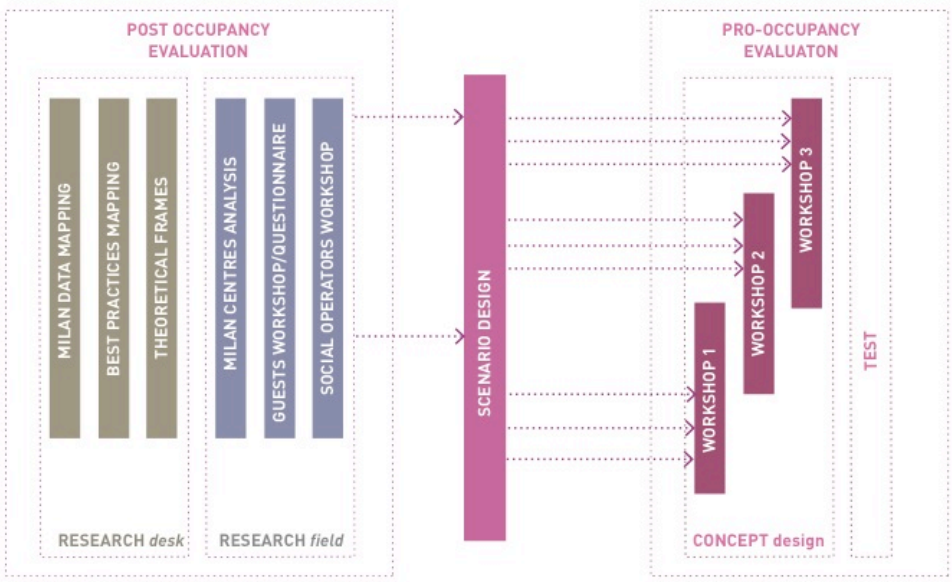

Figure 1 – DeCA research process.

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[3] "Accoglienza" in Italian.

[4] The research is supported by the Department of Social and Health Services of the Municipality of Milan, with the collaboration of the care services (Farsi Prossimo Consortium); it is coordinated by the Research Unit of Interior design of DESIGN Dept. (PoliMi), with interdisciplinary contributions coming from the Research Unit of Advanced Design (DESIGN), Communication Design (DESIGN), the Cultural Heritage and Environment Dept. (UniMi), on the advice of some of the main agencies involved in the management of the building in Milan (Milano City - Sector District Contracts and Aler).

DeCA research consisted of two main phases, corresponding to a different main survey methodology: the first led a complex process of post-occupancy observation, aimed at collecting data on the existing context; the second was a pro-occupancy research[5], which aimed to translate the previous analysis in proactive scenarios, able to open a wide range of design challenges. The research has largely used a methodological approach "through" design (with its roots imaginative and empirical)[6], aimed at enhancing the participation in different forms of the "social component". "No single research methodology could possibly account for the diversity of inputs and output to contemporary design practice and process. There are simply too many markets and media, clients and users, ways and means. There are also too many definition of design itself to pin down a definitive one."[7] Lunenfeld considers design discipline basically a problem-solving activity, able to re-arrange itself (mixed disciplinary tool with new one) due to the target of inquiry.

Figure 2 – Pictures of the two main workshops. Applied methods in consultant phase: data search and "active listening" (such as focus group and Community Visioning), Design Notebook; and in planning one: Design Workshop at S and XS scale. (ph by E.Giunta)

Specifically, the first part of the field survey use of some techniques among those proposed by Christopher Ireland[8] as methods of qualitative research in design. The author, arguing the similarities between ethnographic research and design one, explores the issue of direct feedback by the final user/client or, in other words, the topic of participatory methods. Not only Guests are the unique inhabitants of Reception Centers: social workers too, they are in all respects actors of the complex "living" plot on the stage of resettlement. DeCA research has considered both social workers and educators as fundamental sources of information and creative interpretation of existent. A sub-team of researchers (one psychologist plus one designer) has applied the mentioned techniques in an active workshop session, of a couple of days, with asylum seekers and refugees. Results are concerning imaginaries and qualities of "welcoming places" and micro-planning solutions for new Centers (in particular sleeping rooms, collective spaces and convivial ones) according to users desires.

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[5] Cfr. Giunta, Elena E. 2012. PRO-OCCUPANCY. Design dei microambienti urbani tra performatività dell'allestimento e appartenenze. Rimini: Maggioli.

[6] Cfr. Laurel, Brenda. 2003. Design research. Methods and perspectives. Cambridge: the MIT Press.

[7] Lunefeld, P. 2003. In Laurel, B. Op. cit. Pag. 10

[8] Ireland, Christopher. 2003. "Qualitative methods: from boring to briliant" in Laurel, Brenda. Cit.

Also Brenda Laurel[9] returns to the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of the project: the satisfaction concerning research's outcomes is related to the perception of user/consumer. The outcome of the first phase of the survey was the construction of three scenarios, three tales on the possible and desirable evolutions of the reception centers. All the stories were illustrated, and orally transmitted: they were told through a series of evocative images and collages.

Figure 3 – Resemantized space scenario. (picture by E.Giunta)

The building of a scenario is a process that is invariably geared to synthesis, but also to openness; it is a "future-oriented narrative" – oriented towards a plausible but not predictable future, towards the desired evolution of the contingent situation. In this sense, Peter Schwartz defines scenarios as "a tool for helping us to take a long view in a world of great uncertainty. […] Scenarios are stories about the way the world might turn tomorrow, stories that can help us recognize and adapt to changing aspects of our present environment[10]". In fact, these scenarios have been used to activate a dialogue with designers: from these and inside these tales were finally developed specific design concepts.

These three scenarios expressed three different ideas of space, three ideas regarding the types of relationship between people and the good space in which they live and between the people themselves. Tales were obviously open, because they allow designers and social operators to see possibilities of action

[9] Laurel, Brenda. 2003. "Reports from the field." in Laurel, Brenda. Cit.

[10] P. Schwartz, The art of the view, Currency Doubleday, New York, 1991, p.3. mentioned in M. Celi, Gli scenari come narrazioni del possibile. In A. Penati (2013) Scenario e Narrazioni, Mimesis: Milano

and change and they contained both abstract and empirical notations, data and practices[11] and even emotions (such as in the Map of Tendre, a "touching geographic composition –which- has had numerous incarnations in maps that relate affections to places, incarnations which live on the border between art, cartography and politics"[12]). An additional step has made it possible to 'translate' these open stories into precise guidelines for the fields of environmental design, i.e. those of the designing of spaces, furniture and communication artifacts.

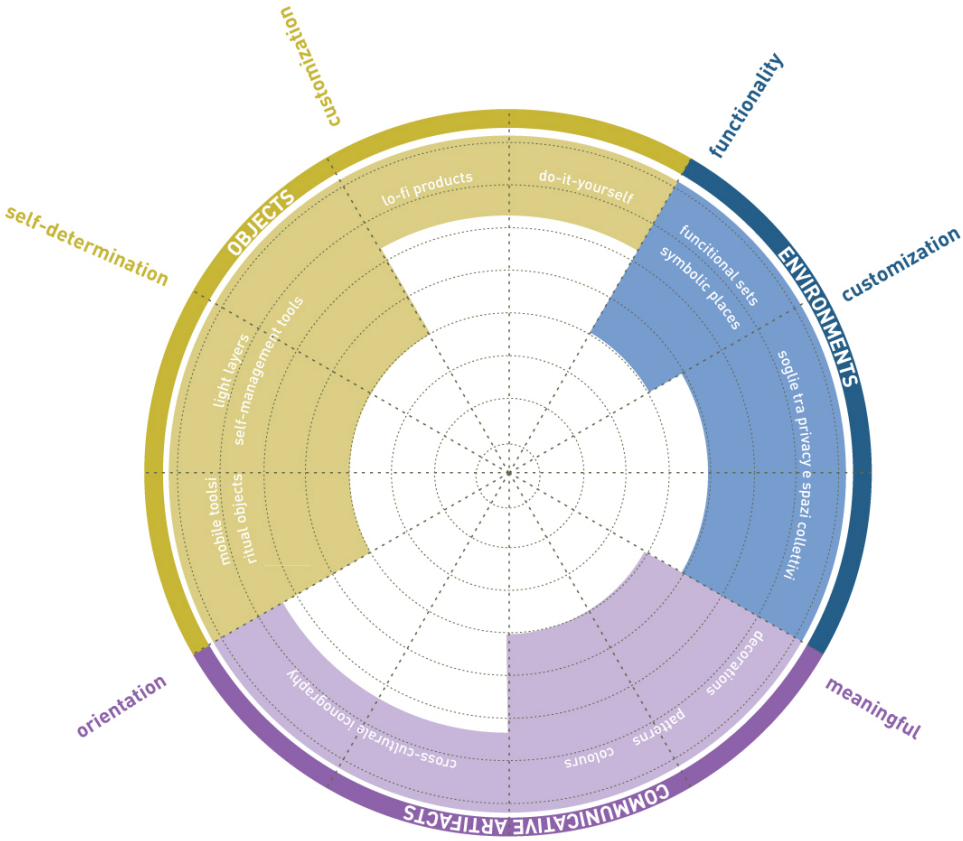

Figure 4 – Diagram of "Resemantized" space.

The scenario of the 'Resemantized space' (see fig. 3) refers to a re-appropriated, personalized, identity space that users can recognize as their own personal safe haven, to which they can give a new, personal meaning. It refers to a space that is transformed from being bare, stark and anonymous to rich in symbols that have great meaning for those who inhabit it, even temporarily. The project works on the space using light, ephemeral elements which, for the limited period of the guest's stay, transform the room into a world, and the guest into a resident. The design equips the room with elements such as fabrics, containers,

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[11] Cf. L. Chiesi, 2009. Lo sguardo dell'architetto. Gli indizi ambientali tra scienze sociali e progettazione. In Amendola, G. (ed.), Il progettista riflessivo. Scienze sociali e progettazione architettonica. Editori Laterza, Rome-Bari

[12] Bruno, G., 2002. Atlante delle emozioni. In viaggio tra arte, architettura e cinema, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, p. 188

dividing elements and customizable surfaces on which the user's personal items may be places and displayed. The furniture allows for cultural variables, emphasizing the multiplicity of inhabitation cultures coexisting in the same space, envisioning the adoption of unforeseen functions, different ways of using the objects and different routine gestures. The room that is not a home becomes a welcoming nest, a safe haven, the guest's 'own place'. The decoration of the surfaces, the color scheme, the patterns of the fabrics and the customizable and adaptable furniture elements all convey familiarity and warmth.

Figure 5 – Diagram of "Free" space. (picture by E.Giunta)

The scenario of the 'Free space', on the other hand, is a scenario of the space freed from control. It is, of course, a calculated space, and is in many aspects preconditioned by organizational needs. But it is also a space that offers the possibility to superimpose over this calculated layer another type of measurement, which is personalized and centered first and foremost on the individual body, protecting its privacy and freedom of movement and action. This is a space in which the guest can feel sheltered, isolated and protected from the exterior context by diaphragms with varying degrees of transparency. It is a space that offers a comprehensive range of functions by providing mobile service blocks that are separate from the architecture of the building shell. In relation to the increasing independence of the guests, the space becomes not only 'domesticated' but also the supplier of constantly new stimuli for inducing positive, provocative, responsible reactions. The free space is also a space in which guests can easily find their way around, in which communication is pervading but friendly, informative but not prescriptive and comprehensible to all, both adults and children.

Lastly, the scenario of the 'Osmotic space' speaks of a place that is permeable to its surroundings. It is essentially a meeting place, a place of relating and

exchange. Firmly related to the urban dimension in which it is set, it is a place of encounter between the inhabitation culture of the local tradition and the cultures that are temporarily housed in it, a place of mutual acquaintance between the stable, permanent city and the temporary, transitory city.

Figure 6 – Diagram of "Osmotic" space. (picture by E.Giunta)

The project equips the space with furniture elements that encourage this conversation, with mobile, flexible diaphragms that can be closed but also opened to reduce and enlarge the space as needed. Of fundamental importance are the areas and furniture where guests can sit, wait, rest; but also spaces dedicated to play and recreation, to passing the time light-heartedly, to learning and making friends; outdoor green areas that suggest actions of care and appropriation which if shared are more effective in creating a sense of welcoming community. The place of reception, which is above all a place of refuge and the recovery of existential stability, also becomes the first place of encounter with the host city, of learning and training. It is no longer an island but a place of passage. Design intervenes, therefore, in elements such as the access barriers, which separate while, at the same time, being crossable, the doorways, the areas of separation between public and private, between individual and collective, the providing of shared multiple-influence 'osmotic' spaces and services, both interior and exterior. It is a place that should favour this individual and collective process and help provide reorientation for those who are disoriented and relocation for those who are temporarily dislocated. This new type of place should be able to build figurative 'bridges' to the future, bridges that can connect people with a stable, safe and dignified new life. We also believe, however, that cultural bridges could be built between the reception sites and the surrounding city. What we envisage and hope, as an outcome of the process, is a system of spaces that have a great cultural value, even before humanitarian. If we build places where the inter-culture is not only practised but

also promoted and spread, we will be able to imagine and design a better future: "The images of the home move in both directions: they are in us as we are in them"[13].

In the meanwhile of the workshop experiences, a more traditional quantitative tool was submitted to the Guests (of the Centres) to support the qualitative data. A multilingual questionnaire (72 items) was administered to gain a statistical picture of the environmental issues perceived as most problematic by the residents. The questionnaire was based on the suggestions received during the consultant and planning workshops and on the analysis of the psychological literature to identify the categories of socio-environmental analysis. A descriptive analysis reveals that the most problematic issues concern place attachment (mean 3.8[14]), a strong feeling of cultural difference (m. 4.5), and territoriality, itself composed of three sub-variables: absence of privacy (only 3.3), lack of personalization (m. 3.6), and a widespread perception of crowding (m. 4.9). Furthermore, analysis of mean values indicates a mild dissatisfaction (mean 4.1-4.3) with other important aspects related to the structure of the centres (distance from the rest of the city, environmental health, lack of recreational facilities). Meanwhile, the respondents appeared to be satisfied with the green spaces (m. 5.3), the perceived safety (*insecurity m.* 3.6), and levels of compatibility among the Centre guests (m. 5.1). They also indicated a high level of respect for their cultural values and traditions, both from those who manage the Centres (m. 5.1) and in the wider Italian context (*lack of respect m.* 3.4).[15]

2.2 DESIGN OF TANGIBLE ANSWERS

The second phase of pro-occupancy research started from the results obtained in the first phase, working on the scenarios through moments of interdisciplinary project-work aimed at the development of innovative projects. With the participation of a range of undergraduate and postgraduate students and young designers, there were three different workshops that, from one or more scenarios identified, have developed project proposals in the field of interior spaces, the communicative artefacts, the furnishing products[16] that gave some immediate answers on the research issues (see fig. 1). In this sense, we have enacted "the function of an industrial designer [that] is to give such form to objects and services that they render the conduct of human life efficient and satisfying"[17]. The results of these works have been exhibited as part of the Fuori

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[13] Bachelard,G. 1958. La poetica dello spazio. (It.1999) Bari: Dedalo. P. 37

[14] evaluation +/- 5

[15] for further detail of research practices and results cfr. Giunta,E. and A.Rebaglio. 2014. Temporary Homes. Stockolm: Spurbuch Publisher.

[16] The workshops' were managed by professors E. Caratti, M. Celi, G. Gerosa, Politecnico di Milano, coordinated by A. Rebaglio and E. Giunta.

[17] ICSID, 1960

Salone in Milan in 2014[18] and one of them was actually applied in a female reception centres.

Figure 7 – Picture of DeCA exhibitin @DOUTDESing, Fuori Salone 2014; detail of signage as applied in female Reception Centre. (ph U.De Berti)

Projects developed ideas starting from the scenario tales and worked on bodies, objects and spaces, through the metaphors of temporariness, hospitableness

[18] The exhibition was hosted @DO UT DESign (Zona Sant'Ambrogio, Milano) from 8th to 13th April 2014

and cross-culturality: these terms define a new and great challenge that ask for innovative and sustainable processes of designing. The formal nature (structure, materials and finishes) of space and its overall configuration prove to be fundamental for an effective qualitative perception: in the interaction with the system of spaces it is essential that the individual perceives himself as capable, that the environment and its functions are readable, that it is practicable and sufficiently modifiable[19]. Containers and systems of objects must be able to respond, over time, to the introverted needs of isolation, intimacy, protection and, conversely, to those extroverted needs of socialization, sharing, co-management, and integration.

The good space is the material, built space, but it is also the effected space, capable of interpreting domestic living and that "cumulative heritage of symbolic constellations" that is intrinsic to every human culture. The design of this space is design which allows itself to be influenced by art and craft, which De Fusco fittingly calls 'artidesign'[20]. This is design that focuses not so much, or rather not only, on industrial and economic type goals, but also on those of a ethic-formal nature: "design is an activity which helps to make the world inhabitable. To arrange it, that is, in such a way that the things we surround ourselves with and the places we live in are 'desirable and dear' ".

An essential part of this idea is the role of the body that acts within the space – the individual body, but also the collective body, the social body, examined by proxemics and cultural anthropology, trained to express itself based on its original cultural model, which dictates the rules of spontaneity, energy and force. As the body is also a cultural construction, habitus, exteriorisation of experience gained in a given environment, common practices and, by extension, space designed to accommodate the body and bodies, it is a completely cultural affair, a structured and structuring disposition. We may say that each habitat corresponds to a set of habitus, as is shown in the portraits of 'material worlds'[21] collected by Menzel, in which the narration is carried out by a type of photography that becomes itself a tableaux, and in which the alluring categorisation of objects, furniture, garments, fabric and colours is accompanied by a reflection on the sustainability of certain models of the usage of artefacts expressed by some cultures.

2.3 DESIGN AS POLITICAL ACTOR

DeCA also recovers the political dimension of the design, looking at the built space as the place of the reification of social norms.

According with a bio political point of view (Foucault, 1997), it is possible to observe in the reception centres the practical application of the state of exception (Agamben, 2000) that characterizes the refugees from a legal standpoint. In particular, these places appear as permanent temporary zones (Rahola, 2003) within which at the bureaucratic precariousness relating to latency in recognizing the refugee status are joined an ontological insecurity,

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[19] I. Altman. 1980. The environment and social behavior. Monterey, CA: Brooks

[20] R. De Fusco. 2008. Il design che prima non c'era. Franco Angeli, Milan

[21] P. Menzel. 1995. Material World: A Global Family Portrait. Sierra Club Books

namely the nostalgic disorientation (Papadopoulos, 1997) related to displacement, and a residential one.

This latter is particularly evident in the Italian context in which refugees /asylum seekers are subjected to a staircase model of hospitality, often marked by variable durations and local arbitrariness. Additionally, they are hosted in places that communicate through its own architectures and facilities this state of precariousness and exceptionality. They are almost always re-arranged buildings (schools, dormitories) or accommodations born to be temporary (containers, mobile homes), chosen to respond to contingent emergencies and never completely redesigned for the actual functions, frequently in derogation of public health laws. Even their placement reflects this sense of permanent temporariness, since they are generally located near the extreme boundaries of the city, often in neighbourhoods characterized by deep social problems and disconnected from urban centres. This sense of separation (and segregation) is further enhanced by the massive use of architectonic elements (walls, gates) and technologies (video surveillance), indicating the presence of a place that is essentially “other” than the outer world.

To act in this complex scenario, DeCA propose to reverse the order of the involved factors, generally described as part of a top-down process by which the political (and legal) powers discipline people building spaces projected to control and separate. Conversely, DeCA triggered a bottom-up process that, starting from the situated imaginary of residents and workers, indicated the future directions of an environmental transformation on a micro-scale level, implemented through the intervention tools of design and architecture. It’s through this spatial transformation that could be generated, at least at a local level, a transition of the management system and rules towards a greater autonomy and life satisfaction for residents.

To accept a process of radical transformation could be, in fact, very hard from the political stakeholders’ point of view, as it calls into question what has been done so far forcing them to embrace an opposite horizon of meaning: from a reductionist model based on an exasperated normativity to a wider framework built on a growing architectonic, social and psychological complexity. The idea is then to activate a place-driven change, rather than act on a political framework characterize by evasiveness and fragmentation.

3 CONCLUSIONS

There thus emerges the importance of ethical-design awareness, as well as aesthetic-design awareness, of the designer in the definition of that core object that floats around and that can contribute to the construction of the relationship between man and his artificial environment and its representations. It is necessary to manage the project, understanding the fallout in terms of well-being/ill-being that affective and emotional investment on the space/object system can generate. A project for interiors can thus be understood as the configuration of artificial habitats: the tension underlying this type of project is to give a material form and containers to relational configurations that are always in the making, that will take place in the spaces. The product-space makes way for the process-space, a sort of “expedient” that is completed, both physically and especially in terms of sense, through individual creativity and

mechanisms of appropriation. In this sense the design, especially the design that addresses issues of high social importance, it is required to cooperate with the social sciences. Only in this way the designer can take a full and active role in promoting strategic change: because it becomes capable of activating relations and dialogue with final users and operators; because it becomes able of promoting forms of narrative on the future promoting a dialogue with the institutions, as well as with other designers; because by the change supported by its design leads to rethink the pre-established models. So, re-design the reception centres does mean rethinking a society that can welcome and integrate over current models.

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